

Spring 2018

# Immigration in Japan: History, Attitudes, and Effects

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## Recommended Citation

Witwicki, Jacqueline, "Immigration in Japan: History, Attitudes, and Effects" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects*. 109.  
<https://collected.jcu.edu/honorspapers/109>

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EA 490 - Capstone

9 April 2018

## Immigration in Japan: Attitudes and Effects

### Introduction

As one of the world's most homogeneous cultures, Japan has a history of closing itself to the world. This has resulted in some of the most stringent immigration policies and guarded national identities in the modern era. However, as Japan's population ages, the nation has begun to experience a labor shortage, particularly involving unskilled labor in positions deemed largely undesirable by Japan's populous. In order to understand Japan's immigration policies and predict how the nation will compensate for its labor shortage, an in depth understanding of Japan's history surrounding immigration is required. From analyzing this history and dissecting legislation and public reactions to specific events, an understanding of Japan's modern and future policies is established. Specific cases can also provide insight into Japanese attitudes towards immigration and what it means to be Japanese. In analyzing how the Technical Intern Training program has changed over time, the public's attitude towards immigrant labor can be dissected. An in depth look at the kind of immigrants Japan grants entry and what this says about the nation's attitudes towards immigrants can be explored in a comparative analysis of its refugee policies and the JET program. Moving to the contemporary scene, instances of imported labor such as Olympic preparation and elder care are observed alongside Abenomics and the nation's aging workforce in order to gain a complex understanding of the nation's current immigration policies and develop recommendations for the nation's future, so that Japan may remain

economically competitive on a global scale. Through analyzing Japan's history, immigration policies over time, and current geo-political climate, the nation's modern immigration policy are better contextualized, and recommendations can be developed for the nation's future.

### Japan's Falling Birth Rate

#### The Aging Workforce

Following World War Two, Japan experienced a baby boom similar to that of the United States. As Japan's baby boomers have aged, however, the nation's fertility rate has fallen to 1.46, well below the desired replacement rate of 2.1 (Fertility Rate, Total (births per Woman)). This aging population bulge, combined with the decline in new births has led to the phenomenon known as the Graying of Japan. In addition, as Japan's population ages, so does its workforce, these older worker will ultimately retire in the near future, leading to an increase of individuals supported by the national pension and welfare systems. Harvard Sociologist, Mary Brinton, identified the effects of this phenomenon as creating "higher costs for the government, a shortage of pension and social security-type funds, a shortage of people to care for the very aged, slow economic growth, and a shortage of young workers" (Weller).

The aging population has resulted in higher costs for the government, manifesting in various ways. As Japan's population has aged, the country's GDP growth has slowed significantly, particularly since the economic boom of the post war era (Lee). Additionally, support costs for the population have risen, leading to pressure on government budgets. With a shortage of working age individuals in the population, the Japanese government has begun to struggle to provide adequate care to the nation's aging population. Without a strong working base to support this segment of the population, both physically and fiscally, the government

experiences financial strain (Braun). There have even been reports of elderly Japanese, experiencing a lack of care, having resorted to committing petty crimes, in order to be jailed, guaranteeing them shelter and food, but placing further strain on the national budget (Weller). The overall population of elderly inmates in Japan has increased to 19% of the total incarcerated population, compared to only 6% of the incarcerated population in the United States (Takenaka).

The aging population has also resulted in a shortage of elder care. Low skill healthcare and caretaker positions are often deemed undesirable and have been hard to fill with the nation's current shortage of working age individuals. Because of this, foreign labor is already being utilized to bolster this sector of the elder care labor force. Japan has actively begun to recruit this foreign labor through the Economic Partnership Agreement between Japan at Indonesia. The first wave of this program accepted 208 applicants and continues to expand, attempting to meet the nation's growing need (Switek 47).

Ultimately, as the nation ages, so does the workforce. This aging workforce has resulted in a shrinking working age population, which will ultimately lead to a national labor shortage. Fields deemed less desirable, such as construction and factory work, are already experiencing major shortages in labor. In a recent report, the Japanese Finance Ministry found that 70% of Japanese firms are experiences the labor shortage in some way. This number is up from the 67% experienced shortage reported last year (Jiji).

### Immigration Policy Historically

#### Sakoku: Edo Era Policies

Japan's history of strict immigration policy began largely with the *sakoku* or "Closed Country" foreign policy area which began in the 1630s and forbade any immigration into the



country while simultaneously preventing any Japanese from leaving the nation (Laver 1). The only exceptions to this policy were made when trading with the Dutch and other select groups in previously determined and specified ports. Foreign traders were not allowed to freely enter the mainland. This policy, which was originally implemented by the Tokugawa Shogun of the Edo Period, lasted for the duration of the period (Jansen). The *sakoku* policies did not cease until America's Commodore Perry sailed to Tokyo Bay with a squadron of battleships, demanding Japan open its borders to American and global trade. The Treaty of Kanagawa, signed in 1854, solidified this new area of policy, allowing very limited immigration and trade between Japan and the West ("The United States and the Opening to Japan, 1853.").

Various rationale have been explored in order to explain the Tokugawa area of Japan's foreign policy. In particular, this policy can be explained by a fear of outside influence, a desire to protect Japanese culture, and a desire by the Tokugawa Shogun to preserve power (Jansen). This desire to protect Japanese culture and deflect outside influence are depicted in bans on Eurocentric religions, particularly Christianity, and the *sakoku* policy's effect on limiting interaction between Japanese and foreigners. From this policy it can be observed that Japan's current approach of limited and protectionist immigration policies have a deep rooted history, as *sakoku* lasted for over 200 years and only ended roughly 150 years ago. This provides a context for the nation's future immigration policies and interactions with foreigners.

### Nikkei Burajiru-jin

The Nikkei Burajiru-jin are individuals of Japanese ancestry who migrated to Brazil after the fall of the Tokugawa Shogun, as the Edo Period came to a close. These individuals left Japan largely as economic refugees. As the Meiji Restoration began, after the close of the Edo Period,

the *sakoku* foreign policy was dismantled as the nation quickly modernized. The Nikkei Burajiru-jin, unable to find economic success or stability in this new area, utilized the nations recently opened borders and fled to Brazil (Adachi 907-910). Once in Brazil, the Nikkei Burajiru-jin experienced a measure of economic success for their new nation and largely maintained marriages within their own ethnic group (Adachi 912).

However, beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the Brazilian economy began to struggle and Japan experienced a labor shortage, many descendants of the original Nikkei Burajiru-jin have opted to engage in a return migration back to Japan (Romero). In Brazil the Nikkei Burajiru-jin are largely regarded as a positive and upper class ethnic minority. Largely occupying white-collar positions, they tend to be revered in Brazil for their Japanese cultural attributes (Adachi 916). Following the return of many descendants of the original Nikkei Burajiru-jin to Japan, these individuals were unable to enjoy the same social standing. Many individuals, being two to three generations removed from Japan, understood minimal written and spoken Japanese and did not align completely with the nation's cultural values. Because of this and other factors Nikkei Burajiru-jin are viewed more favorably than immigrants from other nations, but not as truly Japanese. Due to this, many individuals have experienced downward social mobility in Japan, now serving in blue-collar industries. Dr. Takeyuki Tsuda of UC San Diego summarizes the phenomenon, stating, "[The Nikkei Burajiru-jins'] views of Brazil, which may have been quite critical when they resided in Brazil, became quite positive when they resided in Japan" (Gunde).

The experience of Nikkei Burajiru-jin in Japan became even tenser in April 2009, when the Japanese government instituted the voluntary return program, which offered the equivalent of

3,000 USD for each immigrant to Japan, including Nikkei Burajiru-jin, to return to the nation they previously resided in, and 2,500 USD for each family member they had brought with them. While many criticized this program for being short sighted, it resulted in 21,700 immigrants departing Japan, 93% of whom were Brazilians of Japanese ancestry. The policy ended in March 2010 following backlash (OECD 294-295).

While Japan's voluntary return program was ended following public outcry less than a year after its inception, the existence of the program and its relative success speak to Japanese attitudes towards immigration in the late 2000s. Although the Nikkei Burajiru-jin were of Japanese ancestry, they often felt excluded from Japanese society. While they were viewed more favorably than non-white foreigners without Japanese ancestry, they were ultimately seen as not truly Japanese and thus subject to immigration policies that individuals with no Japanese ancestry would experience. Their position as blue-collar laborers with limited knowledge of Japanese language and culture also played into the attitudes against Nikkei Burajiru-jin in Japan, as they did with individuals participating in Japan's now altered Technical Intern Training Program.

#### Former Technical Intern Training Program / Trainee Program

The Trainee Program was designed to import outside labor into Japan in order to bolster the nation's economy and aging workforce, while filling positions deemed undesirable by Japanese nationals. This program, which began in 1993, promised foreign workers an opportunity to work abroad for 3 years, while earning remittances, which they could send back to their home countries (Revamped Foreign Trainee System).



This program came under fire for failing to place trainees in position where they would gain transferable skills. Many individuals in the program experienced job placements with no practical application in their home countries, which paid so poorly, little to no remittances could be saved and sent home. The theme of poor working conditions and human rights abuses also permeated the program with many participants experiencing blackmail, subpar living condition, and wage abuses (US Department of State).

As the program came under global scrutiny it was significantly altered in the 2000s. Despite the program having undergone various reforms, its original state reflects the nation's attitudes towards migrant workers during this period. While these individuals were crucial for the nation's economic success, they were largely ostracized from society and forced into less than desirable working conditions that a Japanese national would never experience while working in Japan.

### Modern Day Immigration Policies

#### Foreign Workers Today

Today, there are 16 different job categories in which skilled, foreign laborers can work in order to gain a residence permit to remain in Japan. These categories include entertainer, journalist, medical services, and other skilled occupations. Foreign individuals working in these categories operate on the basis of contractual employment. Contracts are typically 1 year long. However, a single contract can employ a standard worker in this program for three years, or five for highly skilled workers.

Historically, this system involved 28 categories. This system has also changed regarding the concept of lifetime employment. Lifetime employment, which is largely considered a right



for the typical Japanese worker, has been a rare commodity for foreign workers to be offered. However, a recent change in legislation has mandated that foreign workers operating in these categories be offered lifetime employment following 5 years of contractual employment. As stated in Japan's Legal code, "When an employee with a fixed period of contract effective April 1, 2013 or thereafter has been employed for over 5 years through contract renewal and requests to be employed under a contract without a definite period, it is deemed that his or her employer accepts the request" (Tokyo Metropolitan Government Bureau of Industrial and Labor Affairs). The foreign worker retains the option to turn down the offer in favor of retaining contractual employment, which has the advantages of greater job flexibility, and the option to refuse company transfers.

This legislation signals the possibility of a new era for Japanese immigration policy. Opening up the possibility of lifetime employment to foreign workers illustrates, on paper, that Japan is becoming less protectionist and more accepting of foreigners. However, this change does not indicate a complete shift in national attitude towards outsiders, as many companies and organizations only elect to renew contracts for the maximum amount of time without incurring the requirement of offering lifetime employment and these same protections are not afforded to unskilled laborers. It is also crucial to note that the program for skilled workers contains more European and American workers than the Technical Intern Training Program, while these programs contain more South East Asian workers. This implies that Japanese attitudes still favor immigrants of certain backgrounds over others.

Current Technical Intern Training Program/Internship Program: Ginō Jisshūsei

The Internship Program, or the Skill Development Ministry's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) bears several resemblances to the program in its original form, with the caveat that interns must be placed in one of 74 job categories which provide transferable skills which individuals can take back to their home countries in order to bolster the region's economy overall. In alignment with this new policy, Japan has introduced legislation criminalizing hiring illegal unskilled foreign workers.

Despite these changes, the Internship Program is still viewed as a means to import cheap unskilled labor. Also, similar to the program in its original form, there have been multiple reports of human rights abuses through the program (Osumi).

With the 2020 Olympics quickly approaching, the number of foreign unskilled laborers operating under the Internship Program is expected to increase by 70,000 prior to the games. From India alone, 10,000 young men have been recruited by TITP in order to assist in the construction of Olympic structures. This particular example is somewhat unique, as India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, has vocally expressed his support for the participation of Indian citizens in the Internship Program, illustrating his expectation that these individuals will return to India with new transferable skills (Pandey). Kyodo News has also reported on government plans to increase the influx of interns from Vietnam prior to the games (Okunukii).

The increase of foreign workers participating in the Internship Program, particularly leading up to the 2020 Olympic Games, indicates Japan's acknowledgement that immigrant labor is necessary to bolster the nation's economy as the workforce diminishes. However, reports of maltreatment in segments of the program still indicate a hesitance as a nation to fully integrate foreign workers into the country or acknowledge the necessity of the labor they provide.

## Refugee Policies

If modern policies in Japan for admitting immigrant laborers indicate progress for a nation recognizing its declining population and aging workforce, Japan's Refugee policies indicate the opposite. With the global refugee crisis at a major tipping point with over 65.3 million individuals displaced, Japan retains some of the most stringent policies for admitting refugees on the planet (Domonoske). From 2010 to 2014 Japan only accepted 86 refugees (Umeda).

Refugees wishing to flee to Japan must first get to Japan, as it is necessary for individuals seeking refugee status in the country to apply from within the country. Individuals are then granted a six-month temporary permission to stay in the country, during which time they must remain on the premise of their government-provided housing and are not permitted to work. These individuals do have access to Japanese language and cultural training (Umeda).

While Japan has contributed \$2.8 billion in aid to host countries of refugee camps, there have not been significant efforts made to bolster support for refugees domestically (Ekin). This policy largely reflects the nation's attitude towards immigrants over all. While highly skilled workers from Western Europe or the Anglophone countries often receive fairly welcome receptions to the country, individuals from poorer nations, with less skilled backgrounds are typically treated as undesirable and second class.

## Japanese Exchange Teaching Program

The Japanese Exchange Teaching, or JET Program, began in 1987 with the goal of increasing mutual cultural understanding between Japan and the rest of the world. Since its inception, JET has employed 62,000 foreign workers from 65 nations. Foreigners can be



employed in the program as Assistant Language Teachers, Coordinators for International Relations, or Sports Exchange Advisors ("About the JET Program « JET Program USA.").

JET exists as a collaboration at all levels of the Japanese government to hire foreign workers with the goal of exposing Japanese youth to foreign young professionals and vice versa, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding. The program is sponsored by Japan's local government authorities which include; the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR). Individuals employed in the JET program are employed on the previously detailed contractual basis of one-year contracts, which can be renewed for a maximum of five years, without the possibility of lifetime employment. However, a very small percentage of foreign workers employed in the program go on to gain permanent job placements in the program ("About the JET Program « JET Program USA."). By setting contractual limits in relation to JET, the Japanese government "explicitly acknowledges that the ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) and CIR (Coordinator for International Relations) slots would forever be positions for temporary outsiders" (McConnell 103-104).

The JET program's goals are in alignment with the aim of changing attitudes in Japan and opening the nation to foreign individuals and concepts. While this is an extremely controlled and measured method for importing diversity to Japan, the possibility that the program will alter youth perception of outsiders, resulting in a more open Japan, could lead to in an easing of the anticipated future economic pains of the nation.

### Analysis



### Future Recommendations

In order to address the nation's current population trends, it is crucial for Japan to open its borders to a wider range of foreign labor. Specifically, steps can be taken to offer contractual labor in a wider range of fields, particularly in those currently experiencing labor shortages like construction and manufacturing.

While the Internship and Trainee Programs have attempted to fill this labor shortage with temporary and low wage workers, the reputation of the program has resulted in a hesitation associated with unskilled workers migrating to Japan. By taking categories of the Internship Program and transferring them to the Skilled Foreign Labor category, foreign workers will be provided with more security and legitimacy in their positions. This would incentivize a measured increase in immigration, which could fill the void of the aging workforce.

Loosening restrictions on refugees and Nikkei-jin could also result in a more balanced population pyramid, resulting in a more supportive social structure for Japan's elderly by widening the base of individuals paying into the welfare system. While Japan is historically hesitant to accept outsiders, particularly ones deemed unskilled, programs like JET could provide a cultural shift in the attitudes of Japan's youth, which could result in a greater likelihood of success for a more open immigration policy.

### Conclusion

While Japanese protectionism and guarded immigration policies served a purpose when the nation was protecting itself from colonization and neocolonialism, the lingering remnants of these policies has resulted in a national attitude that is not compatible with the rate at which the

nation's population is currently aging. Through understanding Japan's immigration history and current immigration legislation in accordance with the nation's aging workforce, it is possible to make recommendations for the nation's future. Ultimately, if Japan's fertility rate continues to decline at its current rate, the nation will need to alter its legislation to allow for more foreign labor. If this does not occur, the debt-GDP ratio will continue to widen, the labor shortage will increase, and the problems of sustaining support for pensions and eldercare will balloon. While Japan has instituted various internal policies in attempts to bolster the birthrate and the economy, without opening the nation to a more legitimate system of importing labor, the Japanese economy will ultimately suffer.

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